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ABSTRACT

A three-course introductory Italian sequence was developed for architecture students planning to study in Italy during the first semester of their fourth year. The course was designed as an afterthought and for students who would need little or no academic Italian. Syllabus planning and student motivation were hampered by lack of time and low priority. However, a common discipline and professional goals created a homogeneous and cohesive group, making planning subsequent courses easier. The second course exposed the students to Italian through familiar subject matter, in part to reduce resistance, and without grammatical sequencing or syntactic simplification. The second class was homogeneous but not cohesive, reducing student receptiveness. The third course required two sections because of a larger enrollment. This situation provided an opportunity to test two approaches. One section was taught survival Italian, and the other was taught more architecture-related material. Although the two section groups seemed cohesive and homogeneous, their responses to the two course themes were different, with the survival language group very intense and the architecture group less so. It is suspected that students resent the teacher's use of architectural material, causing classroom conflict. (MSE)

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Subject Matter as Input for Beginners:

A First Course in Italian for Students of Architecture (A Working Paper)

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This is a descriptive paper, not based on a theoretical model, but concerned with an investigation. The paper records my discoveries as I made them, and reproduces my teaching strategies as they developed in response to perceptions of needs. It contains a chronological account of an investigation in second language acquisition that I have been conducting for three years at Carleton University. The basic assumption for my investigation was that a second language is best acquired when it is used as a vehicle rather than an object of study, and when the course content is focused on material drawn from the students' field of study (previous knowledge). My approach, therefore, relates to Krashen's ideas, especially his sensible reinvention of 'comprehensibility' of input (Krashen 1981).

Background

The DSA (Directed Studies Abroad) program was started by the Carleton School of Architecture in 1981. The program involves a group of approximately twenty architecture stu-

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dents who spend the first term of their fourth year in Rome. In Italy the students attend architecture courses taught in English by Carleton instructors; students live together in a pensione, and share studio space. No interaction with Italian professors or students is required, therefore Italian instruction is not a prerequisite for the DSA program.

The Italian course was a last-minute request, so that course needs were never determined by the School of Architecture, nor were they clearly perceived by the students electing to take Italian. Determining the needs and the objectives was left entirely to the instructor. In other words, it was the case that "whoever determines needs largely determines which needs are determined." (Chambers 1980: 27.)

Phase One: DSA 82

I started to teach my first cohort of students with ad hoc material, and a vast range of strategies: a syllabus that could be loosely described as notional/functional/situational. The main objective was to provide the students with minimal competence in Italian, so that they could perform a very limited set of roles and tasks in a very limited amount of situations. I knew that in Rome students would live, work, attend courses together; that group activities and instruction would isolate them from the Italian-speaking environment; that the use of Italian, in their particular situation, would be required very seldom, and be restricted to a very few 'survival' situations. I was also working with constraints due to lack of time, credit availability, and academic motivation. Syllabus planning time was minimal, and since the course was worth half a credit there were only thirty contact hours available. Student motivation was hindered both by lack of time and the low priority status of the Italian course in their academic requirements. It was impossible to remove these restrictions without restructuring the architecture curriculum. Constraints, therefore, were simply variables to be

taken into account for a future redesigning of the course were it to be repeated.

The course proceded in short-term stages, during which I tried to determine hypothetical short-term needs. The syllabus kept changing almost weekly, as I attempted to accomodate both my perceptions of predictable needs, and the vague definitions that kept emerging from the students. Interestingly enough, the needs surfacing from the students' response were of a cultural and social nature. They wanted to know about the Italians' behaviour, way of life, attitudes and habits, rather than the actual process of language acquisition.

In the *Report* the students wrote after they came back from Italy, they showed they had benefitted from a course so hastily put together:

> Everyone found the course (Italian) most beneficial especially during those first moments in Rome at the train station when lost and overwhelmed. The limited vocabulary gained set up an opportunity for learning in the immersion situation in Rome.

However, the *Report* confirmed that the students were linguistically naive:

> The study of the vocabulary was excellent although many found that the lack of knowledge of verbs prevented the students [us] from carrying on a relaxed conversation. In other words, if the concentration could be on full phrases, it would benefit all.

Many of the students' observations, though, helped me to design short-term and long-term objectives.

In my own assessment of the DSA 82, the unique potential of such a group of students was quite evident. A class profile had clearly emerged. The architecture students formed a homogeneous and cohesive group. Communal life and work in a very human space—such as the School of Architecture—linked them together with an *ésprit du corps* and loyalty that is not often to be found in Arts students. A common discipline, and common professional goals, inevitably create similar needs. I observed commonalities in all the students

of my first group (and in students of subsequent DSA programs). Architecture students have a lively imagination, a flair for creativity, combined with precision, and the need for orderly, and clearly defined structures. Most students rely heavily on drawing as a form of communication. My first group of students used drawings and visual props to bridge the communication gaps in classroom skits.

The emerging class profile also included negative characteristics. Most students seemed to have poor aptitude for languages, including their own. While presenting their architecture projects to a board of Carleton architecture professors and guest critics (CRITS), the students stumbled on words, were barely audible, and hardly intelligible; they were never aggressive in introducing, illustrating, or defending their works. They did not seem to attribute any importance to the oral presentation, as if they felt that their own (and only) way of expressing thoughts, concepts, interpretations, was displayed in their graphic renditions, and their tridimensional models.

We know that aptitudinal and attitudinal factors play an important role in the process of language acquisition. However it is seldom possible to predict a taxonomy of such factors in a particular group of learners, so that strategies can be devised to lower the level of "affective filter," and ease the process of acquisition. In this case, after my first set of discoveries with the DSA 82 students, I was able to predict a rather homogeneous and stable attitudinal and aptitudinal profile for the students in subsequent DSA courses.

Phase Two: DSA 83

My experience with DSA 82 had given me some insight into the characteristics of architecture students. But my observations had not pinpointed either the Architecture School's or the students' perception of course needs. The result was a particularly predictable profile of the DSA class, and an unpredictable, wide range of hypothetical needs. Therefore I decided that the definition of needs for the course would have

the lowest priority in my syllabus design. Futhermore, the syllabus for the DSA 83 would not be restricted to the confining situation-oriented approach. Rather, I would take into account the students' discipline-related attitudes and aptitudes, and experiment with a heuristic approach. The main objective of the course, consequently, was to maximize the potential of the students' knowledge in their own field, i. e. to maximize "comprehensible input" related to architecture. The DSA 83 module was planned as a propedeutic stage in which the students would be exposed to the language by means of familiar subject matter. Italian was to be the vehicle rather than an object of study. The intention was to lead the students towards an understanding of how to acquire language, rather than towards the actual acquisition of Italian. Students were encouraged to discern and to develop their individual learning strategies, and then to apply their discoveries to the second stage of the process: language acquisition outside the classroom when they arrived in Italy. Gradually students would learn to perceive their individual needs, and to develop appropriate strategies.

The short-term objectives for the course then were to provide the students with subject matter input in Italian. I decided that the first five units would concentrate on input that was relevant and easily understandable. I started with geometric and solid forms, with the "language of arithmetic," and with the "language of drawing." Initially students were encouraged to respond to questions only by drawing. In this way, comprehension was checked without insistence on early production, and students were allowed an initial 'silent period.' For the first five units I selected input that I thought would be conceptually familiar and congenial, as well as comprehensible and interesting. The material ranged from the most elementary juxtaposition of architectural elements, to the more complex compositions embodied in architectural objects. The input gradually became less familiar and more

interesting, when I introduced descriptions of Italian architecture that the students had not previously studied. All throughout the five units I felt it important the language I used be at a normal rate, and not artificial. The input was not grammatically sequenced, nor was it consciously syntactically simplified.

Tests were considered an integral component of the acquisition process: I gave classroom tests in order to help students refine their strategies, and to challenge their processes of intuition. The intent was to stimulate the students rather than to test them on material they had previously "learnt."

By using subject matter as comprehensible input I had hoped to overcome the resistance the first group had shown to guessing from context. I had anticipated that professional words and concepts would produce the "right echoes" and lower the level of affective filter in the students' process of language acquisition. I had also thought that by relying initially on their own knowledge, students would feel more comfortable, and would then be encouraged to listen more attentively for other echoes in other situations, other expressions, and other topics. My approach was therefore loosely based on Krashen's 'comprehensibility' of input. However, whereas Krashen would presumably advocate teaching students a familiar content at a language level just above their limited competence, I worked with new content just above the level of the students' 'competence' in architecture.

On the basis of my observations of the DSA 82 group, I had defined common attitudes and aptitudes and as a result I had predicted a homogeneous and cohesive class profile for future classes. The DSA 83 confirmed my hunch of predictable class homogeneity, but not of cohesiveness. The students in my second group were held apart by personal incompatibility, competititiveness, and frequent disagreements. Consequently the receptiveness of the group in general was influenced by these factors. The DSA 83 group rarely re-

sponded with enthusiasm, and often complained about the amount of required work. The tension among the students was almost palpable, and was certainly not conducive to acquiring a language. As a result of this experience I realized that the relaxed yet lively atmosphere created by the DSA 82 class was a variable.

Relying once again on my experience with the DSA 82, I had expected all architecture students to be comfortable drawing free hand. Yet for this group, drawing posed a threat. I persevered, however, with the constant use of architecture input which I still intuitively perceived to be the best initial approach. In addition, I discovered that the DSA 83 students had been frequently exposed to experiments in the School of Architecture. Had I been forewarned, I would not have told them that the content for the Italian course was experimental as well. What I had thought would be a further strategy to get them fully involved in an exciting experimental project was unfortunately a cause of increased class antagonism and discontent. In spite of the class mood and lack of cohesiveness, the results of my experimental architecture input were very encouraging. The students were responding to the various strategies as effectively as I had anticipated. Paradoxically, the students were unconsciously beginning to take Italian for granted. They were not aware of their own progress, nor did they appreciate the intricacy of the language they were by then able to understand, respond to, interact with. Language was the vehicle, not the object of study: the students were interested in the message that the subject matter, in Italian, conveyed.

Though my rapport with the DSA 83 group was less easy-going than the rapport I had enjoyed with the former DSA 82 students, by the middle of the term I had got to know the individual DSA 83 students quite closely. I had asked them, in fact, to write a logbook in which I hoped they would record their reactions and their strategies. What I received, instead,

was a weekly summary of what we had done in class, with no further comments. Then, unexpectedly, I found myself listening to their diaries. Completely out of synchrony with my expectations, they spoke of the students' personal problems. The diaries, no longer logbooks, revealed other characteristics of the architecture students. New facets were added to my former predictable class profile; they enriched my insight into the students who seldom admit their worries and fears, and who, even more rarely, express them in writing.

The initial five units of the module were to be followed either by five more units of architecture input, or by five 'survival' units, determined by my identification of hypothetical needs. Before deciding which set of units to use, I assessed the students' reactions, asked them for any perceptions of their own needs they might have formed. They opted, quite predictably, for the five 'survival' units. Instead of dwelling on my observations on the last part of the course, which was heavily constrained by their impending final architecture projects (CRITS), I would rather turn now directly to my observations of the students during their last week in Rome. The objective of my trip was to observe the students' ability to survive in an Italian-speaking environment. I was determined to watch them in loco, since my previous efforts to assess DSA 82 students upon their return to Canada had been unsuccessful. In Rome, I closely followed the students for approximately four days. I talked to them in groups and individually; I watched them perform all the predictable tasks and roles of everyday life. They ordered meals, bargained in shops, made long distance calls, booked restaurant tables, and made small talk with shopkeepers, waiters and clerks at the post office and bank. By then, the students had been in Rome for approximately three months. They could be suave, humorous, pleading, mildly aggressive, facetious, and even flirtatious, all in broken Italian. On many occasions they

would use body language, and conveyed part of their message by simply imitating the Italians' wordless, eye-contact communications. Most of the students knew a lot of details about the life of the couple who owned the pensione where they were staying. They knew about the couple's problems, their way of life, and the various relatives and their problems. The students had to use Italian since the woman spoke no English, and the man could use a few 'tourist English' expressions.

In Rome, the students did not have to ask for directions, for they knew Rome better than the Romans. They knew where the cheap and expensive shops were, where to find the cheap/bad and the cheap/good restaurants. Their knowledge was a result of their ability to communicate in Italian. The students watched a good deal of television and skimmed the newspaper headlines, looking for news of Canada that was invariably not there. They sat in cafés for long hours. They had absorbed the Italian way of life: it suited them as well as the Italian clothes they were wearing. They refused to be taken for tourists; they wanted to fade into the Italian crowd. The transformation was indeed subtler than their outward appearance. The students strutted along the downtown streets of Rome as if they belonged there; they did not shun the inevitable body contact in crowded piazzas or enclosed spaces. A more self-confident deportment and behaviour reflected other changes in their personality. It seemed that communal life in Rome and the process of acculturation had made them a group, and improved their relationship with one another. Although the exact aetiology of the new group cohesiveness is hard to pinpoint, it was only in Rome that I was able to include that variable to the class profile of DSA 83.

Each of the students in the group had an interview with me before I left Rome. Using Italian, each student described his/her final project of the DSA program. Later I saw an

exhibition of these projects at the Canadian Mediterranean Institute, and was able to confirm that their descriptions had been accurate. They had conveyed to me their concepts, their intuitions, and finally their interpretations of the texture of the city, as well as having proven that they were able to communicate with the people of the city, in predictable and unpredictable situations.

As a going-away present, I was given a book written by one of my favourite Italian architects, and a poster of the Rome exhibition. Both were inscribed with the students' signatures and messages in Italian. One read: *"Claudia voi siete come un raggio di sole in la nostra vita."* In spite of the mistakes, the message conveyed the spirit and the flowery style of the true Italian, and the sense of humour of the student in question.

Phase Three: DSA 84

The School of Architecture asked for the Italian course in good time for the current academic year. However, there was a last-minute surprise at the beginning of the winter term. Changes in planning for the DSA 84 program and a different process of student selection had doubled the numbers. Fortuitously, the surprise provided me with the opportunity to investigate my idea of subject matter teaching further, and to test my course more thoroughly.

The group of approximately forty students was divided into two sections. One section (Survival) was to be taught with the same approach, methodologies, strategies, and textbook as a regular Arts course in oral Italian which focuses on survival skills. The other section (Architecture) was to be taught along the same lines as the DSA 83 course of "subject matter as input for beginners," except that architecture units would be extended throughout the whole course. At the time of splitting the class into two groups, the different designs of the two syllabuses were explained, and students were

allowed to choose which section to join. Though I hoped that the two groups would balance in numbers, I did not want to force the students arbitrarily into the one or the other section. Some students asked to attend both sets of lectures before making up their minds; some students asked, a week later, to switch groups, and were allowed to do so. A few students consulted former DSA colleagues before choosing a section; some relied on their own perceptions of the different approaches presented to them; others may have just played Italian roulette. Although this year's DSA students seem to be as linguistically naive as the previous groups, I believe that they considered the option quite seriously, and discussed the issue at length. The selection process forced them to define their own needs and objectives, however vaguely, before the course actually began.

So far, the DSA 84 students seem to match the predictable profile I had anticipated. The two sections are cohesive and homogeneous. Unlike the DSA 83, the students are not competitive, and there is no discontent about the student selection process for the DSA program. Nothing hinders the rapport among the group members. In both sections the class atmosphere is friendly and easy-going.

The two different sets of teaching strategies that I am using in the two sections, however, elicit different student responses. The Survival group is usually very intense, and very tense throughout the entire class period. The students have not yet relaxed, and do not seem to trust themselves to my methods and my approach. The Architecture section is less tense and less intense. The level of concentration in the Survival section is sometimes painful to watch. Conversely, the level of concentration in the Architecture section is at times sufficiently blasé to wound my teaching ego.

A new factor seems to be surfacing in my use of subject matter as input for beginners; at least it is a factor I had not noticed while I was trying the course on the DSA 83 students.

From the very beginning of the DSA 84, the students have appeared quite reluctant to accept the architecture input, and have shown an apparent lack of concentration. At first I thought it was because they were working on very simple interrelationships of architectural elements, and using very simple arithmetic language. Slowly, I began to realize that when I asked the students to perform, and respond to content that was obviously very comprehensible, they would start to quibble, and react as if the most elementary questions were unexplainable and absurd. In trying to account for this factor my hunch is that the architecture students are unconsciously rejecting my intrusion into "their world." I have entered their inner sanctum, and I have dared to infer that an uninitiated outsider can use the language of architecture.

It is too early to compare and contrast the attitudes and behaviour of the two sections of the DSA 84 group. Whatever professional conclusions I may reach at the end of my investigation, I should note one change now. The tension and unnatural concentration in the Survival section are still hard to ease, whereas the students in the Architecture section are occasionally producing lively sparks of interested response, momentarily dispelling their lack of intensity and concentration. It is a note full of expectations. But that is another story; it will be the inevitable follow-up of this working paper.

Editorial note:

At the time this paper was written the DSA 84 course was still in progress.

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